COVENANT NETWORK

September 19, 1997
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Welcome to Chicago and Fourth Presbyterian Church and on behalf of Bob Bohl, thank you for being here to launch the Covenant Network of Presbyterians.

From June 29, 1996 until June 14, 1997, it was my privilege to serve as Moderator of the 208th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It was the honor of my life.

The year included the requisite travel overseas to bring greetings and encouragement to Presbyterian Mission partners and personnel and, of course, extensive travel within the United States.

I will never forget the daily experience of the vitality of this church. In the midst of all the

handwringing about the demise of the mainline and our continuing membership decline, I kept encountering faithful Presbyterian people engaged in creative ministries of proclamation, compassion, justice, peace-making.

I encountered and experienced a church that has managed to include a rich theological diversity over the years: a church that is home to self-affirming liberals and conservatives and lots and lots of people who live in the center.

I encountered and experienced, daily, a deep affection, a love for the Presbyterian Church that transcends ideology or respective positions on this or that.

And so, everywhere I went, I talked about unity – about the fact that as I read the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians and the Letter to Ephesians the unity of the church, in spite of its diversity, is one of the gifts of the Spirit: that

there is an evangelical imperative about unity: that we are called, in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, to hold on to one another.

Everywhere I went I encountered people whose deep commitments to a particular position on what was then called Amendment B and is now part of the Book of Order, was more important than anything else which seemed to be defining the shape and nature of the church and the church's mission. And so, I was taken to task, vigorously, by opponents of Amendment B who told me my silence – my refusal to condemn the Amendment as sinful and unjust and exclusive – was cowardly and shameful. And I was taken to task, vigorously, by proponents who told me my personal position and my refusal to condemn those who were opposing the Amendment before and after it was approved by a majority of presbyteries, was unfaithful to my office.

And everywhere I went I encountered men and women, on both sides, who were and are concerned about their church, its unity and health and prospects. "Tell us that we'll be all right," they said.

I did not expect to be here. I did not expect Amendment A. I expected that if I had any role at all in a post-moderatorial year, it would be to try to convince my brothers and sisters who were opposed to Amendment B that we could find a way to live with it: that our church would always attempt to honor the faith positions of conscience of its members and officers and congregations. My file of responses to letters from Presbyterian pastors, elders, deacons and members threatening to quit because of Amendment B – my attempt to persuade them to stay – is the thickest file in the drawer. I'm still receiving them and I'm still answering them.

What I did not anticipate was the heat of the rhetoric. I have been accused of manipulating the Assembly, scripting the preachers – including Fred Buechner and Joanna Adams. Can you imagine what Joanna would say if you tried to script her? And from friends who I respect and love, I have heard objections to my role in this new endeavor.

So let me be clear. Unapologetic, but clear. I did not expect to be here. I do not particularly want to be here – although it is good to see each of you. I have my hands quite full as pastor of this church which is what I love to be and to do.

I am here because I believe what happened at the 209th Assembly was not only surprising and unexpected, but a way out of the divide – which, regardless of the Presbyterian plurality, exists in our church, in many congregations and sessions. I'm here because I

believe the new Amendment gives us a chance to live together as brothers and sisters in Christ. I'm here for the same reason I ran for Moderator – namely because I believe the new Amendment says a good and right and moral word and at the same time extends to one another the gentleness and forbearance, the humility and love of Jesus.

Paul wrote,

"I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, learning with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

I'd like now to introduce members of the Executive Committee and National Committee.

Thank you for being here: for investing your time and resources and your hope. I'm particularly grateful to the Reverend Gerry Anderson, pastor of Glen Ellyn Presbyterian Church, who will speak for the Coalition: his presence is important. I know Gerry to be thoughtful, articulate, a friend in ministry.

May God bless our time together. May God use all of us – for the strengthening and the unity of the church.

INTRODUCE:

Joanna Adams, Trinity
Eugene Bay, Bryn Mawr